

perform abortions. In the Bay Area of California, local Tea Party activists have disrupted municipal meetings when minor sustainability strategies are being discussed, claiming they are part of a U.N.-sponsored plot to usher in world government. As Heather Gass of the East Bay Tea Party put it in an open letter after one such gathering: “One day (in 2035) you will wake up in subsidized government housing, eating government subsidized food, your kids will be whisked off by government buses to indoctrination training centers while you are working at your government assigned job on the bottom floor of your urban transit center village because you have no car and who knows where your aging parents will be but by then it will be too late! WAKE UP!!!!”²²

Clearly there is something about climate change that has some people feeling very threatened indeed.

Unthinkable Truths

Walking past the lineup of tables set up by the Heartland conference’s sponsors, it’s not terribly hard to see what’s going on. The Heritage Foundation is hawking reports, as are the Cato Institute and the Ayn Rand Institute. The climate change denial movement—far from an organic convergence of “skeptical” scientists—is entirely a creature of the ideological network on display here, the very one that deserves the bulk of the credit for redrawing the global ideological map over the last four decades. A 2013 study by Riley Dunlap and political scientist Peter Jacques found that a striking 72 percent of climate denial books, mostly published since the 1990s, were linked to right-wing think tanks, a figure that rises to 87 percent if self-published books (increasingly common) are excluded.²³

Many of these institutions were created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when U.S. business elites feared that public opinion was turning dangerously against capitalism and toward, if not socialism, then an aggressive Keynesianism. In response, they launched a counterrevolution, a richly funded intellectual movement that argued that greed and the limitless pursuit of profit were nothing to apologize for and offered the greatest hope for human emancipation that the world had ever known. Under this libera-

tionist banner, they fought for such policies as tax cuts, free trade deals, for the auctioning off of core state assets from phones to energy to water—the package known in most of the world as “neoliberalism.”

At the end of the 1980s, after a decade of Margaret Thatcher at the helm in the U.K. and Ronald Reagan in the United States, and with communism collapsing, these ideological warriors were ready to declare victory: history was officially over and there was, in Thatcher’s often repeated words, “no alternative” to their market fundamentalism. Filled with confidence, the next task was to systematically lock in the corporate liberation project in every country that had previously held out, which was usually best accomplished in the midst of political turmoil and large-scale economic crises, and further entrenched through free trade agreements and membership in the World Trade Organization.

It had all been going so well. The project had even managed to survive, more or less, the 2008 financial collapse directly caused by a banking sector that had been liberated of so much burdensome regulation and oversight. But to those gathered here at the Heartland conference, climate change is a threat of a different sort. It isn’t about the political preferences of Republicans versus Democrats; it’s about the physical boundaries of the atmosphere and ocean. If the dire projections coming out of the IPCC are left unchallenged, and business as usual is indeed driving us straight toward civilization-threatening tipping points, then the implications are obvious: the ideological crusade incubated in think tanks like Heartland, Cato, and Heritage will have to come to a screeching halt. Nor have the various attempts to soft-pedal climate action as compatible with market logic (carbon trading, carbon offsets, monetizing nature’s “services”) fooled these true believers one bit. They know very well that ours is a global economy created by, and fully reliant upon, the burning of fossil fuels and that a dependency that foundational cannot be changed with a few gentle market mechanisms. It requires heavy-duty interventions: sweeping bans on polluting activities, deep subsidies for green alternatives, pricey penalties for violations, new taxes, new public works programs, reversals of privatizations—the list of ideological outrages goes on and on. Everything, in short, that these think tanks—which have always been public proxies for far more powerful corporate interests—have been busily attacking for decades.

And there is also the matter of “global equity” that keeps coming up in the climate negotiations. The equity debate is based on the simple scientific fact that global warming is caused by the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere over two centuries. That means that the countries that got a large head start on industrialization have done a great deal more emitting than most others. And yet many of the countries that have emitted least are getting hit by the impacts of climate change first and worst (the result of geographical bad luck as well as the particular vulnerabilities created by poverty). To address this structural inequity sufficiently to persuade fast-growing countries like China and India not to destabilize the global climate system, earlier emitters, like North America and Europe, will have to take a greater share of the burden at first. And there will obviously need to be substantial transfers of resources and technology to help battle poverty using low carbon tools. This is what Bolivia’s climate negotiator Angélica Navarro Llanos meant when she called for a Marshall Plan for the Earth. And it is this sort of wealth redistribution that represents the direst of thought crimes at a place like the Heartland Institute.

Even climate action at home looks suspiciously like socialism to them; all the calls for high-density affordable housing and brand-new public transit are obviously just ways to give backdoor subsidies to the undeserving poor. Never mind what this war on carbon means to the very premise of global free trade, with its insistence that geographical distance is a mere fiction to be collapsed by Walmart’s diesel trucks and Maersk’s container ships.

More fundamentally than any of this, though, is their deep fear that if the free market system really has set in motion physical and chemical processes that, if allowed to continue unchecked, threaten large parts of humanity at an existential level, then their entire crusade to morally redeem capitalism has been for naught. With stakes like these, clearly greed is not so very good after all. And that is what is behind the abrupt rise in climate change denial among hardcore conservatives: they have come to understand that as soon as they admit that climate change is real, they will lose the central ideological battle of our time—whether we need to plan and manage our societies to reflect our goals and values, or whether that task can be left to the magic of the market.

jobs in lieu of bribes; political donations need to be both fully disclosed and tightly capped; campaigns must be given the right to access the public airwaves; and, ideally, elections should be publicly funded as a basic cost of having a democracy.

Yet among large sections of the public, a sense of fatalism pervades: how can you convince politicians to vote for reforms designed to free them from the binds of corporate influence when those binds are still tightly in place? It's tough, to be sure, but the only thing politicians fear more than losing donations is losing elections. And this is where the power of climate change—and its potential for building the largest possible political tent—comes into play. As we have seen, the scientific warnings that we are running out of time to avert climate disaster are coming from a galaxy of credible scientific organizations and establishment international agencies—from the American Association for the Advancement of Science to NASA to Britain's Royal Society to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences to the World Bank to the International Energy Agency. A resurgent climate movement could use those warnings to light a fire under the call to kick corporate money out of politics—not just fossil fuel money, but money from all the deep-pocketed barriers to progress from the National Rifle Association to the fast food industry to the private-prison complex. Such a rallying cry could bring together all of the various constituencies that would benefit from reducing corporate power over politics—from health care workers to parents worried about their children's safety at school. There are no guarantees that this coalition could succeed where other attempts at similar reforms have failed. But it certainly seems worth expending at least as much energy and money as the U.S. climate movement did trying, unsuccessfully, to push through climate legislation that it knew was wholly inadequate, precisely because it was written to try to neutralize opposition from fossil fuel companies (more on that later).

Not an "Issue," a Frame

The link between challenging corruption and lowering emissions is just one example of how the climate emergency could—by virtue of its urgency and

the fact that it impacts, well, everyone on earth—breathe new life into a political goal for which there is already a great deal of public support. The same holds true for many of the other issues discussed so far—from raising taxes on the rich to blocking harmful new trade deals to reinvesting in the public sphere. But before those kinds of alliances can be built, some very bad habits will need to be abandoned.

Environmentalists have a long history of behaving as if no issue is more important than the Big One—why, some wonder (too often out loud), is everyone wasting their time worrying about women's rights and poverty and wars when it's blindingly obvious that none of this matters if the planet decides to start ejecting us for poor behavior? When the first Earth Day was declared in 1970, one of the movement's leaders, Democratic senator Gaylord Nelson, declared that the environmental crisis made "Vietnam, nuclear war, hunger, decaying cities, and all other major problems one could name . . . relatively insignificant by comparison." Which helps explain why the great radical journalist I. F. Stone described Earth Day as "a gigantic snowjob" that was using "rock and roll, idealism and non-inflammatory social issues to turn the youth off from more urgent concerns which might really threaten our power structure."⁶⁴

They were both wrong. The environmental crisis—if conceived sufficiently broadly—neither trumps nor distracts from our most pressing political and economic causes: it supercharges each one of them with existential urgency. As Yotam Marom, an organizer with Occupy Wall Street in New York, wrote in July 2013, "The fight for the climate isn't a separate movement, it's both a challenge and an opportunity for *all* of our movements. We don't need to become climate activists, we *are* climate activists. We don't need a separate climate movement; we need to seize the climate *moment*."⁶⁵

The nature of the moment is familiar but bears repeating: whether or not industrialized countries begin deeply cutting our emissions this decade will determine whether we can expect the same from rapidly developing nations like China and India next decade. That, in turn, will determine whether or not humanity can stay within a collective carbon budget that will give us a decent chance of keeping warming below levels that our own governments have agreed are unacceptably dangerous. In other words, we don't have another couple of decades to talk about the changes we want while being satisfied with the occasional incremental victory. This set of

hard facts calls for strategy, clear deadlines, dogged focus—all of which are sorely missing from most progressive movements at the moment.

Even more importantly, the climate moment offers an overarching narrative in which everything from the fight for good jobs to justice for migrants to reparations for historical wrongs like slavery and colonialism can all become part of the grand project of building a nontoxic, shockproof economy before it's too late.

And it is also worth remembering because it's so very easy to forget: the alternative to such a project is not the status quo extended indefinitely. It is climate-change-fueled disaster capitalism—profiteering disguised as emission reduction, privatized hyper-militarized borders, and, quite possibly, high-risk geoengineering when things spiral out of control.

So how realistic is it to imagine that the climate crisis could be a political game changer, a unifier for all these disparate issues and movements? Well, there is a reason hard-right conservatives are putting so much effort into denying its existence. Their political project is not, after all, as sturdy as it was in 1988, when climate change first pierced public consciousness. Free market ideology may still bind the imaginations of our elites, but for most of the general public, it has been drained of its powers to persuade. The disastrous track record of the past three decades of neoliberal policy is simply too apparent. Each new blast of statistics about how a tiny band of global oligarchs controls half the world's wealth exposes the policies of privatization and deregulation for the thinly veiled license to steal that they always were. Each new report of factory fires in Bangladesh, soaring pollution in China, and water cut-offs in Detroit reminds us that free trade was exactly the race to the bottom that so many warned it would be. And each news story about an Italian or Greek pensioner who took his or her own life rather than try to survive under another round of austerity is a reminder of how many lives continue to be sacrificed for the few.

The failure of deregulated capitalism to deliver on its promises is why, since 2009, public squares around the world have turned into rotating semipermanent encampments of the angry and dispossessed. It's also why there are now more calls for fundamental change than at any point since the 1960s. It's why a challenging book like Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, exposing the built-in structures of ever-increasing

wealth concentration, can sit atop bestseller lists for months, and why when comedian and social commentator Russell Brand went on the BBC and called for “revolution,” his appearance attracted more than ten million YouTube views.⁶⁶

Climate change pits what the planet needs to maintain stability against what our economic model needs to sustain itself. But since that economic model is failing the vast majority of the people on the planet on multiple fronts that might not be such a bad thing. Put another way, if there has ever been a moment to advance a plan to heal the planet that also heals our broken economies and our shattered communities, this is it.

Al Gore called climate change “an inconvenient truth,” which he defined as an inescapable fact that we would prefer to ignore. Yet the truth about climate change is inconvenient only if we are satisfied with the status quo except for the small matter of warming temperatures. If, however, we see the need for transformation quite apart from those warming temperatures, then the fact that our current road is headed toward a cliff is, in an odd way, convenient—because it tells us that we had better start making that sweeping turn, and fast.

Not surprisingly, the people who understand this best are those whom our economic model has always been willing to sacrifice. The environmental justice movement, the loose network of groups working with communities on the toxic front lines of extractive industries—next to refineries, for instance, or downstream from mines—has always argued that a robust response to emission reduction could form the basis of a transformative economic project. In fact the slogan long embraced by this movement has been “System Change, Not Climate Change”—a recognition that these are the two choices we face.⁶⁷

“The climate justice fight here in the U.S. and around the world is not just a fight against the [biggest] ecological crisis of all time,” Miya Yoshitani, executive director of the Oakland-based Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), explains. “It is the fight for a new economy, a new energy system, a new democracy, a new relationship to the planet and to each other, for land, water, and food sovereignty, for Indigenous rights, for human rights and dignity for all people. When climate justice wins we win the world that we want. We can’t sit this one out, not because we have too

much to lose but because we have too much to gain. . . . We are bound together in this battle, not just for a reduction in the parts per million of CO₂, but to transform our economies and rebuild a world that we want today.”⁶⁸

This is what many liberal commentators get wrong when they assume that climate action is futile because it asks us to sacrifice in the name of far-off benefits. “How can you persuade the human race to put the future ahead of the present?” asked *Observer* columnist Nick Cohen despondently.⁶⁹ The answer is that you don’t. You point out, as Yoshitani does, that for a great many people, climate action is their best hope for a better present, and a future far more exciting than anything else currently on offer.

Yoshitani is part of a vibrant activist scene in the San Francisco Bay Area that is ground zero of the green jobs movement most prominently championed by former Obama advisor Van Jones. When I first met Yoshitani, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network was working closely with Asian immigrants in Oakland to demand affordable housing close to a mass transit station to make sure that gentrification didn’t displace the people who actually use subways and buses. And APEN has also been part of an initiative to help create worker co-ops in the solar energy sector in nearby Richmond, so that there are jobs on offer other than the ones at the local Chevron oil refinery.

More such connections between climate action and economic justice are being made all the time. As we will see, communities trying to stop dangerous oil pipelines or natural gas fracking are building powerful new alliances with Indigenous peoples whose territories are also at risk from these activities. And several large environmental organizations in the U.S.—including Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, the BlueGreen Alliance, and 350.org—took stands in support of demands for comprehensive reform of the U.S. immigration system, in part because migration is increasingly linked to climate and also because members of immigrant communities are often prevented from defending themselves against heightened environmental risks since doing so could lead to incarceration or deportation.⁷⁰

These are encouraging signs, and there are plenty of others. Yet the kind of counter-power that has a chance of changing society on anything close to the scale required is still missing. It is a painful irony that while the right is forever casting climate change as a left-wing plot, most leftists and

liberals are still averting their eyes, having yet to grasp that climate science has handed them the most powerful argument against unfettered capitalism since William Blake's "dark Satanic Mills" blackened England's skies (which, incidentally, was the beginning of climate change). By all rights, this reality should be filling progressive sails with conviction, lending new confidence to the demands for a more just economic model. And yet when demonstrators are protesting the various failures of this system in Athens, Madrid, Istanbul, and New York, climate change is too often little more than a footnote when it could be the coup de grâce.⁷¹

The mainstream environmental movement, meanwhile, generally stands apart from these expressions of mass frustration, choosing to define climate activism narrowly—demanding a carbon tax, say, or even trying to stop a pipeline. And those campaigns are important. But building a mass movement that has a chance of taking on the corporate forces arrayed against science-based emission reduction will require the broadest possible spectrum of allies. That would include the public sector workers—firefighters, nurses, teachers, garbage collectors—fighting to protect the services and infrastructure that will be our best protection against climate change. It would include antipoverty activists trying to protect affordable housing in downtown cores, rather than allowing low-income people to be pushed by gentrification into sprawling peripheries that require more driving. As Colin Miller of Oakland-based Bay Localize told me, "Housing is a climate issue." And it would include transit riders fighting against fare increases at a time when we should be doing everything possible to make subways and buses more comfortable and affordable for all. Indeed when masses of people take to the streets to stop such fare hikes and demand free public transit—as they did in Brazil in June and July of 2013—these actions should be welcomed as part of a global effort to fight climate chaos, even if those populist movements never once use the words "climate change."⁷²

Perhaps it should be no surprise that a sustained and populist climate movement has not yet emerged—a movement like that has yet to be sustained to counter any of the other failures of this economic model. Yes, there have been periods when mass outrage in the face of austerity, corruption, and inequality has spilled into the streets and the squares for weeks and months on end. Yet if the recent years of rapid-fire rebellions have

demonstrated anything, it is that these movements are snuffed out far too quickly, whether by repression or political cooptation, while the structures they opposed reconstitute themselves in more terrifying and dangerous forms. Witness Egypt. Or the inequalities that have grown even more obscene since the 2008 economic crisis, despite the many movements that rose up to resist the bailouts and austerity measures.

I have, in the past, strongly defended the right of young movements to their amorphous structures—whether that means rejecting identifiable leadership or eschewing programmatic demands. And there is no question that old political habits and structures must be reinvented to reflect new realities, as well as past failures. But I confess that the last five years immersed in climate science has left me impatient. As many are coming to realize, the fetish for structurelessness, the rebellion against any kind of institutionalization, is not a luxury today's transformative movements can afford.

The core of the problem comes back to the same inescapable fact that has both blocked climate action and accelerated emissions: all of us are living in the world that neoliberalism built, even if we happen to be critics of neoliberalism.

In practice that means that, despite endless griping, tweeting, flash mobbing, and occupying, we collectively lack many of the tools that built and sustained the transformative movements of the past. Our public institutions are disintegrating, while the institutions of the traditional left—progressive political parties, strong unions, membership-based community service organizations—are fighting for their lives.

And the challenge goes deeper than a lack of institutional tools and reaches into our very selves. Contemporary capitalism has not just accelerated the behaviors that are changing the climate. This economic model has changed a great many of us as individuals, accelerated and uprooted and dematerialized us as surely as it has finance capital, leaving us at once everywhere and nowhere. These are the hand-wringing clichés of our time—What is Twitter doing to my attention span? What are screens doing to our relationships?—but the preoccupations have particular relevance to the way we relate to the climate challenge.

Because this is a crisis that is, by its nature, slow moving and intensely place based. In its early stages, and in between the wrenching disasters,

climate is about an early blooming of a particular flower, an unusually thin layer of ice on a lake, the late arrival of a migratory bird—noticing these small changes requires the kind of communion that comes from knowing a place deeply, not just as scenery but also as sustenance, and when local knowledge is passed on with a sense of sacred trust from one generation to the next. How many of us still live like that? Similarly, climate change is also about the inescapable impact of the actions of past generations not just on the present, but on generations in the future. These time frames are a language that has become foreign to a great many of us. Indeed Western culture has worked very hard to erase Indigenous cosmologies that call on the past and the future to interrogate present-day actions, with long-dead ancestors always present, alongside the generations yet to come.

In short: more bad timing. Just when we needed to slow down and notice the subtle changes in the natural world that are telling us that something is seriously amiss, we have sped up; just when we needed longer time horizons to see how the actions of our past impact the prospects for our future, we entered into the never-ending feed of the perpetual now, slicing and dicing our attention spans as never before.

To understand how we got to this place of profound disconnection from our surroundings and one another, and to think about how we might build a politics based on reconnection, we will need to go back a good deal further than 1988. Because the truth is that, while contemporary, hyper-globalized capitalism has exacerbated the climate crisis, it did not create it. We started treating the atmosphere as our waste dump when we began using coal on a commercial scale in the late 1700s and engaged in similarly reckless ecological practices well before that.

Moreover, humans have behaved in this shortsighted way not only under capitalist systems, but under systems that called themselves socialist as well (whether they were or not remains a subject of debate). Indeed the roots of the climate crisis date back to core civilizational myths on which post-Enlightenment Western culture is founded—myths about humanity's duty to dominate a natural world that is believed to be at once limitless and entirely controllable. This is not a problem that can be blamed on the political right or on the United States; these are powerful cultural narratives that transcend geography and ideological divides.

means full steam ahead with fossil fuel extraction, complemented with renewables around the margins—Blockadia is responding with a tough philosophy that might be described as “None of the below.” It is based on the simple principle that it’s time to stop digging up poisons from the deep and shift, with all speed, to powering our lives from the abundant energies on our planet’s surface.

Operation Climate Change

While the scale and connectivity of this kind of anti-extraction activism is certainly new, the movement began long before the fight against Keystone XL. If it’s possible to trace this wave back to a time and place, it should probably be the 1990s in what is surely the most oil-ravaged place on the planet: the Niger Delta.

Since the doors to foreign investors were flung open near the end of British colonial rule, oil companies have pumped hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of crude out of Nigeria, most from the Niger Delta, while consistently treating its land, water, and people with undisguised disdain. Wastewater was dumped directly into rivers, streams, and the sea; canals from the ocean were dug willy-nilly, turning precious freshwater sources salty, and pipelines were left exposed and unmaintained, contributing to thousands of spills. In an often cited statistic, an *Exxon Valdez*-worth of oil has spilled in the Delta every year for about fifty years, poisoning fish, animals, and humans.²⁵

But none of this compares with the misery that is gas flaring. Over the course of extracting oil, a large amount of natural gas is also produced. If the infrastructure for capturing, transporting, and using that gas were built in Nigeria, it could meet the electricity needs of the entire country. Yet in the Delta, the multinational companies mostly opt to save money by setting it on fire, or flaring it, which sends the gas into the atmosphere in great pillars of polluting fire. The practice is responsible for about 40 percent of Nigeria’s total CO₂ emissions (which is why, as discussed, some companies are absurdly trying to collect carbon credits for stopping this practice). Meanwhile, more than half of Delta communities lack electricity and running

water, unemployment is rampant, and, in a cruel irony, the region is plagued by fuel shortages.²⁶

Since the 1970s, Nigerians living in the Delta have been demanding redress for the damage done to them by multinational oil giants. The fight entered a new phase at the start of the 1990s when the Ogoni—a relatively small Indigenous group in the Niger Delta—organized the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by the famed human rights activist and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa. The group took particular aim at Shell, which had extracted \$5.2 billion from Ogoniland between 1958 and 1993.²⁷

The new organization did more than beg the government for better conditions, it asserted the rights of the Ogoni people to control the resources under their lands and set about taking those rights back. Not only were oil installations shut down, but as Nigerian political ecologist and environmental activist Godwin Uyi Ojo writes that, on January 4, 1993, “an estimated 300,000 Ogoni, including women and children, staged a historic non-violent protest, and marched against Shell’s ‘ecological wars.’” That year, Shell was forced to pull out of Ogoni territory, forsaking significant revenues (though the company remains the biggest oil player in other parts of the Delta). Saro-Wiwa stated that the Nigerian state “will have to shoot and kill every Ogoni man, woman and child to take more of their oil.”²⁸

To this day, oil production has ceased in Ogoniland—a fact that remains one of the most significant achievements of grassroots environmental activism anywhere in the world. Because of Ogoni resistance, carbon has stayed in the ground and out of the atmosphere. In the two decades since Shell withdrew, the land has slowly begun to heal, and there are tentative reports of improved farming output. This represents, according to Ojo, “on a global scale, the most formidable community-wide resistance to corporate oil operations.”²⁹

But Shell’s banishment was not the end of the story. From the start of the protests, the Nigerian government—which relies on oil for 80 percent of its revenues and 95 percent of its export earnings—saw the organized Ogoni as a grave threat. As the region mobilized to take its land back from Shell, thousands of Delta residents were tortured and killed and

dozens of Ogoni villages were razed. In 1995, the military regime of General Sani Abacha tried Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his compatriots on trumped-up charges. And then all nine men were hanged, fulfilling Saro-Wiwa's prediction that "they are going to arrest us all and execute us. All for Shell."³⁰

It was a wrenching blow to the movement, but residents of the Niger Delta fought on. By employing increasingly militant tactics like taking over offshore oil platforms, oil barges, and flow stations, this community-led resistance managed to shut down roughly twenty oil installations, significantly reducing production.³¹

A key and little examined chapter in the Niger Delta's fossil fuel resistance took place at the tail end of 1998. Five thousand young people belonging to the Ijaw Nation, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, held a gathering in Kaiama, a town in a southern province of the Delta. There, the Ijaw Youth Council drafted the Kaiama Declaration, which asserted that 70 percent of the government's oil revenues came from Ijaw land and that, "Despite these huge contributions, our reward from the Nigerian State remains avoidable deaths resulting from ecological devastation and military repression." The declaration—endorsed by a huge cross-section of Delta society—stated: "All land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within the Ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival," and went on to demand "Self Government and resource control."³²

But it was Clause 4 that commanded the most attention: "We, therefore, demand that all oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area. . . . Hence, we advise all oil companies staff and contractors to withdraw from Ijaw territories by the 30th December, 1998 pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control in the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta."³³

The Ijaw Youth Council voted unanimously to call their new offensive Operation Climate Change. "The idea was: we are going to change our world," Isaac Osuoka, one of the movement's organizers, told me. "There was an understanding of the link that the same crude oil that impoverishes us, also impoverishes the Earth. And that a movement to change the wider world can begin from changing our own world." This was, in other

words, an attempt at another kind of climate change—an effort by a group of people whose lands had been poisoned and whose future was imperiled to change their political climate, their security climate, their economic climate, and even their spiritual climate.³⁴

As promised, on December 30 the youth took to the streets in the thousands. The leadership instructed participants not to carry weapons and not to drink. The demonstrations—called *Ogeles*, which are traditional Ijaw processions—were nonviolent and dramatic. Many participants wore black, held candles, sang, danced, and drummed. Several oil platforms were occupied, not with arms but through the sheer numbers of bodies that overwhelmed security guards. “Sometimes,” Osuoka recalled in a phone interview, “a person will have worked for a short time for the oil companies, so they knew which valve was the one to turn off.”

The Nigerian government’s response was overwhelming. An estimated fifteen thousand troops were mobilized, warships were sent, as were fleets of tanks. In some regions the government declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew. According to Osouka, “In village after village, soldiers deployed by the state opened fire on unarmed citizens.” In the towns of “Kaiama, Mbiama, and Yenagoa people were killed in the streets and women and young girls were raped in their homes as the state unleashed mayhem, ostensibly to defend oil installations.”³⁵

The confrontations continued for about a week. By the end, as many as 200 or possibly more lives were reported lost, and dozens of houses had been burned to the ground. In at least one case, the soldiers who conducted lethal raids flew into the area on a helicopter taken from a Chevron operation. (The oil giant claimed it had no choice but to allow the equipment to be used by the military, since it came from a joint venture with the Nigerian government, though as Human Rights Watch noted, “The company did not issue any public protest at the killings; nor has it stated that it will take any steps to avoid similar incidents in the future.”)³⁶

Brutal events like these go a long way toward explaining why many young people in the Niger Delta today have lost their faith in nonviolence. And why, by 2006, the area was in the throes of a full-blown armed insurgency, complete with bombings of oil infrastructure and government targets, rampant pipeline vandalism, ransom kidnapping of oil workers

(designated as “enemy combatants” by the militants), and, more recently, amnesty deals that offered cash for guns. Godwin Uyi Ojo writes that, as the armed conflict wore on, “grievance was soon mingled with greed and violent crimes.”³⁷ In the process, the original goals of the movement—to stop the ecological plunder, and take back control over the region’s resource—became harder to decipher.

And yet it is worth looking back to the 1990s when the aims were clear. Because what is evident in the original struggles of the Ogoni and Ijaw is that the fight against violent resource extraction and the fight for greater community control, democracy, and sovereignty are two sides of the same coin. The Nigerian experience also had a huge and largely uncredited influence on other resource-rich regions in the Global South that found themselves facing off against multinational oil giants.

The most important such exchange took place in 1995, immediately after the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa, when activists from Environmental Rights Action in Nigeria formed an alliance with a similar organization in Ecuador, called *Acción Ecológica*. At that time *Acción Ecológica* was neck deep in an environmental and human health disaster that Texaco had left behind in a northeastern region of the country, an incident that became known as the “Rainforest Chernobyl.” (Chevron, after acquiring Texaco, was later ordered to pay \$9.5 billion in damages by the Ecuadorian supreme court; the legal battles are still ongoing).³⁸ These frontline activists in two of the worst oil-impacted regions on the planet formed an organization called Oilwatch International, which has been at the forefront of the global movement to “leave the oil in the soil” and whose influence can be felt throughout Blockadia.

As the experiences in Nigeria and Ecuador make clear, anti-extraction activism is not a new phenomenon. Communities with strong ties to the land have always, and will always, defend themselves against businesses that threaten their ways of life. And fossil fuel resistance has a long history in the United States, most notably against mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia. Moreover, direct action against reckless resource extraction

has been a part of the environmental movement for a very long time and has succeeded in protecting some of the planet's most biologically diverse lands and waters. Many of the specific tactics being used by Blockadia activists today—tree-sits and equipment lockdowns in particular—were developed by Earth First! in the 1980s, when the group fought “wars in the woods” against clear-cut logging.

What has changed in recent years is largely a matter of scale, which is itself a reflection of the dizzying ambitions of the extractive project at this point in history. The rise of Blockadia is, in many ways, simply the flip side of the carbon boom. Thanks to a combination of high commodity prices, new technologies, and depleted conventional reserves, the industry is going further on every front. It is extracting more, pushing into more territory, and relying on more risky methods. Each of these factors is fueling the backlash, so it's worth looking at each in turn.

All in the Sacrifice Zone

Though there are certainly new and amplified risks associated with our era of extreme energy (tar sands, fracking for both oil and gas, deepwater drilling, mountaintop removal coal mining), it's important to remember that these have never been safe or low-risk industries. Running an economy on energy sources that release poisons as an unavoidable part of their extraction and refining has always required sacrifice zones—whole subsets of humanity categorized as less than fully human, which made their poisoning in the name of progress somehow acceptable.

And for a very long time, sacrifice zones all shared a few elements in common. They were poor places. Out-of-the-way places. Places where residents lacked political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language, and class. And the people who lived in these condemned places knew they had been written off. To quote Paula Swearengin, an activist from a coal mining family near Beckley, West Virginia, a landscape ravaged by mountaintop-removal coal mining: “We live in the land of the lost.”³⁹

Through various feats of denialism and racism, it was possible for privileged people in North America and Europe to mentally cordon off these

unlucky places as hinterlands, wastelands, nowhere—or unluckiest of all, as in the case of Nauru, middle of nowhere. For those fortunate enough to find ourselves outside those condemned borders, myself among them, it seemed as if our places—the ones where we live and to which we escape for pleasure (the assumed somewheres, the centers, or best of all, the centers of everywhere)—would not be sacrificed to keep the fossil fuel machine going.

And up until quite recently, that has held up as the grand bargain of the carbon age: the people reaping the bulk of the benefits of extractivism pretend not to see the costs of that comfort so long as the sacrifice zones are kept safely out of view.

But in less than a decade of the extreme energy frenzy and the commodity boom, the extractive industries have broken that unspoken bargain. In very short order, the sacrifice zones have gotten a great deal larger, swallowing ever more territory and putting many people who thought they were safe at risk. Not only that, but several of the largest zones targeted for sacrifice are located in some of the wealthiest and most powerful countries in the world. For instance, Daniel Yergin, energy industry consultant (and author of *The Prize*), euphorically described the newfound capacity to extract oil from “tight rock” formations—usually shale—as being akin to discovering whole new petrostates: “This is like adding another Venezuela or Kuwait by 2020, except these tight oil fields are in the United States.”⁴⁰

And of course it's not just the communities next to these new oil fields that are asked to sacrifice. So much oil is now being extracted in the U.S. (or “Saudi America,” as some market watchers call it) that the number of rail cars carrying oil has increased by 4111 percent in just five years, from 9,500 cars in 2008 to an estimated 400,000 in 2013. (Little wonder that significantly more oil spilled in U.S. rail incidents in 2013 than spilled in the previous forty years combined—or that trains engulfed in smoking fireballs have become increasingly frequent sights on the nightly news.) In practice this means that hundreds if not thousands of towns and cities suddenly find themselves in the paths of poorly maintained, underregulated “oil bomb” trains—towns like Quebec's Lac-Mégantic, where, in July 2013, a train carrying seventy-two tank cars of fracked Bakken oil (more flammable than the regular kind) exploded, killing forty-seven people and flattening half of

its picturesque downtown. (Former North Dakota governor George Sinner said the oil trains posed a “ridiculous threat” shortly after one blew up near his native town of Casselton.)⁴¹

The Alberta tar sands, meanwhile, are growing so fast that the industry will soon be producing more of its particular brand of high-carbon oil than current pipeline capacity can handle—which is why it is so determined to push projects like Keystone XL through the U.S. and Northern Gateway through British Columbia. “If there was something that kept me up at night,” said Alberta’s (then) energy minister Ron Liepert in June 2011, “it would be the fear that before too long we’re going to be landlocked in bitumen. We’re not going to be an energy superpower if we can’t get the oil out of Alberta.”⁴² But building those pipelines, as we have seen, impacts a huge number of communities: the ones living along thousands of kilometers of proposed pipe, as well as those who live along vast stretches of coastline that would see their waters crowded with oil tankers, courting disaster.

No place, it seems, is off limits, and no extractive activity has set its sights on more new land than hydraulic fracturing for natural gas. To quote Chesapeake Energy’s then-CEO Aubrey McClendon, in 2010, “In the last few years we have discovered the equivalent of two Saudi Arabias of oil in the form of natural gas in the United States. Not one, but two.”⁴³ Which is why the industry is fighting to frack wherever it can. The Marcellus Shale, for instance, spans parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland. And it is just one of many such massive blankets of methane-rich rock.

The endgame, according to Republican politician Rick Santorum, is to “drill everywhere”—and it shows. As *The Guardian*’s Suzanne Goldenberg reports, “Energy companies have fracked wells on church property, school grounds and in gated developments. Last November, an oil company put a well on the campus of the University of North Texas in nearby Denton, right next to the tennis courts and across the road from the main sports stadium and a stand of giant wind turbines.” Fracking now covers so much territory that, according to a 2013 *Wall Street Journal* investigation, “more than 15 million Americans live within a mile of a well that has been drilled and fracked since 2000.”⁴⁴

In Canada, the ambitions are just as aggressive. “As of mid-2012, the entire underground subsoil of Montréal, Laval, and Longueuil (three of the main cities in Québec) had been claimed by gas and petrol companies,” reports Kim Cornelissen, a former politician turned anti-fracking campaigner in the province. (So far, Quebec’s residents have managed to fend off the gas companies with a moratorium.) In Britain, the area under consideration for fracking adds up to about half the entire island. And in July 2013, residents of the northeast of England were enraged to hear their region described as “uninhabited and desolate” in the House of Lords—and therefore eminently deserving of sacrifice. “Certainly in part of the northeast where there’s plenty of room for fracking, well away from anybody’s residence where we could conduct [it] without any kind of threat to the rural environment,” said Lord Howell, who had been an energy advisor to David Cameron’s government.⁴⁵

This is coming as a rude surprise to a great many historically privileged people who suddenly find themselves feeling something of what so many frontline communities have felt for a very long time: how is it possible that a big distant company can come to *my* land and put me and my kids at risk—and never even ask my permission? How can it be legal to put chemicals in the air right where they know children are playing? How is it possible that the state, instead of protecting me from this attack, is sending police to beat up people whose only crime is trying to protect their families?

This unwelcome awakening has made the fossil fuel sector a whole lot of enemies out of onetime friends. People like South Dakota cattle rancher John Harter, who went to court to try to stop TransCanada from burying a portion of the Keystone XL pipeline on his land. “I’ve never considered myself a bunny hugger,” he told a reporter, “but I guess if that’s what I’ve got to be called now, I’m OK with it.” The industry has also alienated people like Christina Mills, who worked as an auditor for oil companies in Oklahoma for much of her career. But when a gas company started fracking in her middle-class North Texas subdivision, her views of the sector changed. “They made it personal here, and that’s when I had a problem. . . . They came into the back of our neighbourhood, 300ft from the back fence. That is so intrusive.”⁴⁶

And fracking opponents could only laugh when, in February 2014, it

emerged that none other than Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson had quietly joined a lawsuit opposing fracking-related activities near his \$5 million Texas home, claiming it would lower property values. "I would like to officially welcome Rex to the 'Society of Citizens Really Enraged When Encircled by Drilling' (SCREWED)," wrote Jared Polis, a Democratic Congressman from Colorado, in a sardonic statement. "This select group of everyday citizens has been fighting for years to protect their property values, the health of their local communities, and the environment. We are thrilled to have the CEO of a major international oil and gas corporation join our quickly multiplying ranks."⁴⁷

In 1776, Tom Paine wrote in his rabble-rousing pamphlet *Common Sense*, "It is the good fortune of many to live distant from the scene of sorrow."⁴⁸ Well, the distance is closing, and soon enough no one will be safe from the sorrow of ecocide. In a way, the name of the company at the center of Greece's anti-mining movement says it all: Eldorado—a reference to the legendary "lost city of gold" that drove the conquistadors to some of their bloodiest massacres in the Americas. This kind of pillage used to be reserved for non-European countries, with the loot returned to the motherland in Europe. But as Eldorado's activities in northern Greece make clear, today the conquistadors are pillaging on their home turf as well.

That may prove to have been a grave strategic error. As Montana-based environmental writer and activist Nick Engelfried puts it, "Every fracking well placed near a city's water supply and every coal train rolling through a small town gives some community a reason to hate fossil industries. And by failing to notice this, oil, gas and coal companies may be digging their political graves."⁴⁹

None of this means that environmental impacts are suddenly evenly distributed. Historically marginalized people in the Global South, as well as communities of color in the Global North, are still at far greater risk of living downstream from a mine, next door to a refinery, or next to a pipeline, just as they are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. But in the era of extreme energy, there is no longer the illusion of discreet sacrifice zones anymore. As Deeohn Ferris, formerly with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, aptly put it, "we're all in the same sinking boat, only people of color are closest to the hole."⁵⁰

LOVE WILL SAVE THIS PLACE

Democracy, Divestment, and the Wins So Far

"I believe that the more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction."

—Rachel Carson, 1954¹

"What good is a mountain just to have a mountain?"

—Jason Bostic, Vice President of the West Virginia Coal Association, 2011²

On a drizzly British Columbia day in April 2012, a twenty-seven-seat turbo-prop plane landed at the Bella Bella airport, which consists of a single landing strip leading to a clapboard building. The passengers descending from the blue-and-white Pacific Coastal aircraft included the three members of a review panel created by the Canadian government. They had made the 480-kilometer journey from Vancouver to this remote island community, a place of deep fjords and lush evergreen forests reaching to the sea, to hold public hearings about one of the most contentious new pieces of fossil fuel infrastructure in North America: Enbridge's proposed Northern Gateway pipeline.

Bella Bella is not directly on the oil pipeline's route (that is 200 kilometers even further north). However, the Pacific ocean waters that are its front yard are in the treacherous path of the oil tankers that the pipeline would load up with diluted tar sands oil—up to 75 percent more oil in some supertankers than the *Exxon Valdez* was carrying in 1989 when it spilled in Alaska's Prince William Sound, devastating marine life and fisheries across

the region.³ A spill in these waters could be even more damaging, since the remoteness would likely make reaching an accident site difficult, especially during winter storms.

The appointed members of the Joint Review Panel—one woman and two men, aided by support staff—had been holding hearings about the pipeline impacts for months now and would eventually present the federal government with their recommendation on whether the project should go ahead. Bella Bella, whose population is roughly 90 percent Heiltsuk First Nation, was more than ready for them.

A line of Heiltsuk hereditary chiefs waited on the tarmac, all dressed in their full regalia: robes embroidered with eagles, salmon, orcas, and other creatures of these seas and skies; headdresses adorned with animal masks and long trails of white ermine fur, as well as woven cedar basket hats. They greeted the visitors with a welcome dance, noisemakers shaking in their hands and rattling from the aprons of their robes, while a line of drummers and singers backed them up. On the other side of the chain link fence was a large crowd of demonstrators carrying anti-pipeline signs and canoe paddles.

Standing a respectful half step behind the chiefs was Jess Housty, a slight twenty-five-year-old woman who had helped to galvanize the community's engagement with the panel (and would soon be elected to the Heiltsuk Tribal Council as its youngest member). An accomplished poet who created Bella Bella's first and only library while she was still a teenager, Housty described the scene at the airport as "the culmination of a huge planning effort driven by our whole community."⁴

And it was young people who had led the way, turning the local school into a hub of organizing. Students had worked for months in preparation for the hearings. They researched the history of pipeline and tanker spills, including the 2010 disaster on the Kalamazoo River, noting that Enbridge, the company responsible, was the same one pushing the Northern Gateway pipeline. The teens were also keenly interested in the *Exxon Valdez* disaster since it took place in a northern landscape similar to their own. As a community built around fishing and other ocean harvesting, they were alarmed to learn about how the salmon of Prince William Sound had become sick in the years after the spill, and how herring stocks had com-

pletely collapsed (they are still not fully recovered, more than two decades later).

The students contemplated what such a spill would mean on their coast. If the sockeye salmon, a keystone species, were threatened, it would have a cascade effect—since they feed the killer whales and white-sided dolphins whose dorsal fins regularly pierce the water's surface in nearby bays, as well as the seals and sea lions that bark and sunbathe on the rocky outcroppings. And when the fish return to the freshwater rivers and streams to spawn, they feed the eagles, the black bears, the grizzlies, and the wolves, whose waste then provides the nutrients to the lichen that line the streams and riverbanks, as well as to the great cedars and Douglas firs that tower over the temperate rainforest. It's the salmon that connect the streams to the rivers, the river to the sea, the sea back to the forests. Endanger salmon and you endanger the entire ecosystem that depends on them, including the Heiltsuk people whose ancient culture and modern livelihood is inseparable from this intricate web of life.

Bella Bella's students wrote essays on these themes, prepared to present testimony, and painted signs to greet the panel members. Some went on a forty-eight-hour hunger strike to dramatize the stakes of losing their food source. Teachers observed that no issue had ever engaged the community's young people like this—some even noticed a decline in depression and drug use. That's a very big deal in a place that not long ago suffered from a youth suicide epidemic, the legacy of scarring colonial policies, including generations of children—the great-grandparents, grandparents, and sometimes the parents of today's teens and young adults—being taken from their families and placed in church-run residential schools where abuse was rampant.

Housty recalls, "As I stood behind our chiefs [on the tarmac], I remember thinking how the community had grown around the issue from the first moment we heard rumblings around Enbridge Northern Gateway. The momentum had built and it was strong. As a community, we were prepared to stand up with dignity and integrity to be witnesses for the lands and waters that sustained our ancestors—that sustain us—that we believe should sustain our future generations."

After the dance, the panel members ducked into a white minivan that took them on the five-minute drive into town. The road was lined with

hundreds of residents, including many children, holding their handmade poster-board signs. "Oil Is Death," "We Have the Moral Right to Say No," "Keep Our Oceans Blue," "Our Way of Life Cannot Be Bought!," "I Can't Drink Oil." Some held drawings of orcas, salmon, even kelp. Many of the signs simply said: "No Tankers." One man thought the panel members weren't bothering to look out the window, so he thumped the side of the van as it passed and held his sign up to the glass.

By some counts, a third of Bella Bella's 1,095 residents were on the street that day, one of the largest demonstrations in the community's history.⁵ Others participated in different ways: by harvesting and preparing food for the evening feast, where the panel members were to be honored guests. It was part of the Heiltsuk's tradition of hospitality but it was also a way to show the visitors the foods that would be at risk if just one of those super-tankers were to run into trouble. Salmon, herring roe, halibut, oolichan, crab, and prawns were all on the menu.

Similar scenes had played out everywhere the panel traveled in British Columbia: cities and towns came out in droves, voicing unanimous or near unanimous opposition to the project. Usually First Nations were front and center, reflecting the fact that the province is home to what is arguably the most powerful Indigenous land rights movement in North America, evidenced by the fact that roughly 80 percent of its land remains "unceded," which means that it has never been relinquished under any treaty nor has it ever been claimed by the Canadian state through an act of war.⁶

Yet there was clearly something about the passion of Bella Bella's greeting that unnerved the panel members. The visitors refused the invitation to the feast that evening, and Chief Councilor Marilyn Slett was put in the unenviable position of having to take the microphone and share a letter she had just received from the Joint Review Panel. It stated that the pipeline hearings for which the assembled crowd had all been preparing for months were canceled. Apparently the demonstration on the way from the airport had made the visitors feel unsafe and, the letter stated, "The Panel cannot be in a situation where it is unsure that the crowd will be peaceful." It later emerged that the sound of that single man thumping the side of the van had somehow been mistaken for gunfire. (Police in attendance asserted that the demonstrations had been nonviolent and that there was never any security threat.)⁷

Housty said the news of the cancellation had a “physical impact. We had done everything according to our teachings, and to feel the back of someone’s hand could hardly have been more of an insult.” In the end, the hearings went ahead but a day and a half of promised meeting time was lost, depriving many community members of their hope of being heard in person.*⁸

What shocked many of Bella Bella’s residents was not just the weird and false accusation of violence; it was the extent to which the entire spirit of their actions seemed to have been misunderstood. When the panel members looked out the van window, they evidently saw little more than a stereotypical mob of angry Indians, wanting to vent their hatred on anyone associated with the pipeline. But to the people on the other side of the glass, holding their paddles and fish paintings, the demonstration had not primarily been about anger or hatred. It had been about love—a collective and deeply felt expression of love for their breathtaking part of the world.

As the young people of this community explained when they finally got the chance, their health and identity were inextricably bound up in their ability to follow in the footsteps of their forebears—fishing and paddling in the same waters, collecting kelp in the same tidal zones in the outer coastal islands, hunting in the same forests, and collecting medicines in the same meadows. Which is why Northern Gateway was seen not simply as a threat to the local fishery but as the possible undoing of all this intergenerational healing work. And therefore as another wave of colonial violence.

When Jess Housty testified before the Enbridge Gateway review panel (she had to travel for a full day to Terrace, British Columbia to do it), she put this in unequivocal terms.

When my children are born, I want them to be born into a world where hope and transformation are possible. I want them to be born into a world where stories still have power. I want them to grow up able to be Heiltsuk in every sense of the word. To practice the customs and understand the identity that has made our people strong for hundreds of generations.

* When a make-up hearing was scheduled by the Joint Review Panel months later, it was held in a predominantly white community elsewhere in the province.

That cannot happen if we do not sustain the integrity of our territory, the lands and waters, and the stewardship practices that link our people to the landscape. On behalf of the young people in my community, I respectfully disagree with the notion that there is any compensation to be made for the loss of our identity, for the loss of our right to be Heiltsuk.⁹

The power of this ferocious love is what the resource companies and their advocates in government inevitably underestimate, precisely because no amount of money can extinguish it. When what is being fought for is an identity, a culture, a beloved place that people are determined to pass on to their grandchildren, and that their ancestors may have paid for with great sacrifice, there is nothing companies can offer as a bargaining chip. No safety pledge will assuage; no bribe will be big enough. And though this kind of connection to place is surely strongest in Indigenous communities where the ties to the land go back thousands of years, it is in fact Blockadia's defining feature.

I saw it shine brightly in Halkidiki, Greece, in the struggle against the gold mine. There, a young mother named Melachrini Liakou—one of the movement's most tireless leaders—told me with unswerving confidence that the difference between the way she saw the land, as a fourth-generation farmer, and the way the mining company saw the same patch of earth, was that, "I am a part of the land. I respect it, I love it and I don't treat it as a useless object, as if I want to take something out of it and then the rest will be waste. Because I want to live here this year, next year, and to hand it down to the generations to come. In contrast, Eldorado, and any other mining company, they want to devour the land, to plunder it, to take away what is most precious for themselves."¹⁰ And then they would leave behind, she said, "a huge chemical bomb for all mankind and nature."

Alexis Bonogofsky (who had told me what a "huge mistake" the oil companies made in trying to bring their big rigs along Highway 12) speaks in similar terms about the fight to protect southeastern Montana from mining companies like Arch Coal. But for Bonogofsky, a thirty-three-year-old goat rancher and environmentalist who does yoga in her spare time, it's less about farming than deer hunting. "It sounds ridiculous but there's this one

spot where I can sit on the sandstone rock and you know that the mule deer are coming up and migrating through, you just watch these huge herds come through, and you know that they've been doing that for thousands and thousands of years. And you sit there and you feel connected to that. And sometimes it's almost like you can feel the earth breathe." She adds: "That connection to this place and the love that people have for it, that's what Arch Coal doesn't get. They underestimate that. They don't understand it so they disregard it. And that's what in the end will save that place. Is not the hatred of the coal companies, or anger, but love will save that place."¹¹

This is also what makes Blockadia conflicts so intensely polarized. Because the culture of fossil fuel extraction is—by both necessity and design—one of extreme rootlessness. The workforce of big rig drivers, pipefitters, miners, and engineers is, on the whole, highly mobile, moving from one worksite to the next and very often living in the now notorious "man camps"—self-enclosed army-base-style mobile communities that serve every need from gyms to movie theaters (often with an underground economy in prostitution).

Even in places like Gillette, Wyoming, or Fort McMurray, Alberta, where extractive workers may stay for decades and raise their kids, the culture remains one of transience. Almost invariably, workers plan to leave these blighted places as soon as they have saved enough money—enough to pay off student loans, to buy a house for their families back home, or, for the really big dreamers, enough to retire. And with so few well-paying blue-collar jobs left, these extraction jobs are often the only route out of debt and poverty. It's telling that tar sands workers often discuss their time in northern Alberta as if it were less a job than a highly lucrative jail term: there's "the three-year plan" (save \$200,000, then leave); "the five-year-plan" (put away half a million); "the ten-year-plan" (make a million and retire at thirty-five). Whatever the details (and however unrealistic, given how much money disappears in the city's notorious party scene), the plan is always pretty much the same: tough it out in Fort Mac (or Fort McMurray as it is often called), then get the hell out and begin your real life. In one survey, 98 percent of respondents in the tar sands area said they planned to retire somewhere else.¹²

There is a real sadness to many of these choices: beneath the bravado of

the bar scene are sky-high divorce rates due to prolonged separations and intense work stress, soaring levels of addiction, and a great many people wishing to be anywhere but where they are. This kind of disassociation is part of what makes it possible for decent people to inflict the scale of damage to the land that extreme energy demands. A coalfield worker in Gillette, Wyoming, for instance, told me that to get through his workdays, he had trained himself to think of the Powder River Basin as “another planet.”¹³ (The moonscape left behind by strip mining no doubt made this mental trick easier).

These are perfectly understandable survival strategies—but when the extractive industry’s culture of structural transience bumps up against a group of deeply rooted people with an intense love of their homeplace and a determination to protect it, the effect can be explosive.

Love and Water

When these very different worlds collide, one of the things that seems to happen is that, as in *Bella Bella*, communities begin to cherish what they have—and what they stand to lose—even more than before the extractive threat arrived. This is particularly striking because many of the people waging the fiercest anti-extraction battles are, at least by traditional measures, poor. But they are still determined to defend a richness that our economy has not figured out how to count. “Our kitchens are filled with homemade jams and preserves, sacks of nuts, crates of honey and cheese, all produced by us,” Doina Dediu, a Romanian villager protesting fracking, told a reporter. “We are not even that poor. Maybe we don’t have money, but we have clean water and we are healthy and we just want to be left alone.”¹⁴

So often these battles seem to come to this stark choice: water vs. gas. Water vs. oil. Water vs. coal. In fact, what has emerged in the movement against extreme extraction is less an anti-fossil fuels movement than a pro-water movement.

I was first struck by this in December 2011 when I attended a signing ceremony for the Save the Fraser Declaration, the historic Indigenous people’s declaration pledging to prevent the Northern Gateway pipeline and

important wherever we live, there is nothing more important than helping ensure that new structures in Asia are built to the highest standards of efficiency. Otherwise, we are all—the North, South, East, and West—in for catastrophic emissions growth.⁴¹

Tipping the Balance

There is, however, much that can be done in the industrialized north to help tip the balance of forces toward a model of development that does not rely on endless growth and dirty fuels. Fighting the pipelines and export terminals that would send fossil fuels to Asia is one piece of the puzzle. So is battling new free-trade deals, reining in our own overconsumption, and sensibly relocalizing our economies, since plenty of the carbon China is burning is going toward making useless stuff for us.

But the most powerful lever for change in the Global South is the same as in the Global North: the emergence of positive, practical, and concrete alternatives to dirty development that do not ask people to choose between higher living standards and toxic extraction. Because if dirty coal is the only way to turn on the lights in India, then that is how those lights will be turned on. And if public transit is a disaster in Delhi, then more and more people will keep choosing to drive cars.

And there are alternatives—models of development that do not require massive wealth stratification, tragic cultural losses, or ecological devastation. As in the Yasuní case, movements in the Global South are fighting hard for these alternative development models—policies that would bring power to huge numbers of people through decentralized renewable energy and revolutionize urban transportation so that public transit is far more desirable than private cars (indeed, as discussed, there have been riots demanding free public transit in Brazil).

One proposal receiving increasing attention is for a “global feed-in tariff,” which would create an internationally administered fund to support clean energy transitions throughout the developing world. The architects of this plan—economist Tariq Banuri and climate expert Niclas Hällström—estimate that a \$100 billion annual investment for ten to fourteen years

“could effectively help 1.5 billion people gain access to energy, while taking decisive steps toward a renewable energy future in time to prevent all our societies from suffering from climate catastrophe.”⁴²

Sunita Narain, director general of one of the most influential environmental organizations in India, the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, stresses that the solution is not for the wealthy world to contract its economies while allowing the developing world to pollute its way to prosperity (even if this were possible). It is for developing countries to “develop differently. We do not want to first pollute and then clean up. So we need money, we need technology, to be able to do things differently.”⁴³ And that means the wealthy world must pay its climate debts.

And yet financing a just transition in fast-developing economies has not been a priority of activists in the North. Indeed a great many Big Green groups in the United States consider the idea of climate debt to be politically toxic, since, unlike the standard “energy security” and green jobs arguments that present climate action as a race that rich countries can win, it requires emphasizing the importance of international cooperation and solidarity.

Sunita Narain hears these objections often. “I’m always being told—especially by my friends in America—that . . . issues of historical responsibility are something that we should not talk about. What my forefathers did is not my responsibility.” But, she said in an interview, this overlooks the fact that those past actions have a direct bearing on why some countries are rich and others are poor. “Your wealth today has a relationship with the way society has drawn on nature, and overdrawn on nature. That has to be paid back. That’s the historical responsibility issues that we need to confront.”⁴⁴

These debates are, of course, familiar from other reparations battles. In Latin America, progressive economists have long argued that Western powers owe an “ecological debt” for centuries of colonial land grabs and resource extraction, while Africa and Caribbean governments have, at various points (most notably the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa) called for reparations to be paid for transatlantic slavery. After receding for more than a decade after the Durban conference, these claims were back in the news in 2013 when fourteen Caribbean nations banded together to make a formal reparations claim to

Britain, France, the Netherlands, and other European countries that participated in the slave trade. "Our constant search and struggle for development resources is linked directly to the historical inability of our nations to accumulate wealth from the efforts of our peoples during slavery and colonialism," said Baldwin Spencer, prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, in July 2013. The goal of reparations, he argued, was to break the chains of dependency once and for all.⁴⁵

The rich world, for the most part, pretty much ignores these calls, dismissing it all as ancient history, much as the U.S. government manages to disregard calls for slavery reparations from African Americans (though in the spring of 2014, the calls grew distinctly louder, thanks to breakthrough reporting by *The Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates, which once again rekindled the debate).⁴⁶ But the case for climate debt is a little different. We can debate the legacy of colonialism, and we can argue about how much slavery shapes modern underdevelopment. But the science of climate change doesn't leave much room for that kind of disagreement. Carbon leaves an unmistakable trail, the evidence etched in coral and ice cores. We can accurately measure how much carbon we can collectively emit into the atmosphere and who has taken up what share of that budget over the past two hundred years or so.

On the other hand, all of these various suppressed and neglected debts are not separate from one another but are better understood as different chapters in the same, continuous story. It was planet-warming coal that powered the textile mills and sugar refineries in Manchester and London that needed to be fed with ever more raw cotton and sugarcane from the colonies, most of it harvested by slave labor. And Eric Williams, the late scholar and Trinidad's first prime minister, famously argued that profits from slavery directly subsidized the growth of industrialization in England, a process that we now know led inextricably to climate change. The details of Williams's claims have long been vigorously debated, but his work received additional vindication in 2013 when researchers at University College London released a database collecting information on the identities and finances of British slave-owners in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁷

The research project delved into the fact that when the British Parlia-

ment ruled to abolish slavery in its colonies in 1833, it pledged to compensate British slave owners for the loss of their human property—a backward form of reparations for the perpetrators of slavery, not its victims. This led to payouts adding up to £20 million—a figure that, according to *The Independent*, “represented a staggering 40 per cent of the Treasury’s annual spending budget and, in today’s terms, calculated as wage values, equates to around £16.5bn.” Much of that money went directly into the coal-powered infrastructure of the now roaring Industrial Revolution—from factories to railways to steamships. These, in turn, were the tools that took colonialism to a markedly more rapacious stage, with the scars still felt to this day.⁴⁸

Coal didn’t create structural inequality—the boats that enabled the transatlantic slave trade and first colonial land grabs were powered by wind, and the early factories powered by water wheels. But the relentless and predictable power of coal certainly supercharged the process, allowing both human labor and natural resources to be extracted at rates previously unimaginable, laying down the bones of the modern global economy.

And now it turns out that the theft did not end when slavery was abolished, or when the colonial project faltered. In fact, it is still in progress, because the emissions from those early steamships and roaring factories were the beginning of the buildup of excess atmospheric carbon. So another way of thinking about this history is that, starting two centuries ago, coal helped Western nations to deliberately appropriate other people’s lives and lands; and as the emissions from that coal (and later oil and gas) continually built up in the atmosphere, it gave these same nations the means to inadvertently appropriate their descendants’ sky as well, gobbling up most of our shared atmosphere’s capacity to safely absorb carbon.

As a direct result of these centuries of serial thefts—of land, labor, and atmospheric space—developing countries today are squeezed between the impacts of global warming, made worse by persistent poverty, and by their need to alleviate that poverty, which, in the current economic system, can be done most cheaply and easily by burning a great deal more carbon, dramatically worsening the climate crisis. They cannot break this deadlock without help, and that help can only come from those countries and corporations that grew wealthy, in large part, as a result of those illegitimate appropriations.

The difference between this reparations claim and older ones is not that the case is stronger. It's that it does not rest on ethics and morality alone: wealthy countries do not just need to help the Global South move to a low-emissions economic path because it's the right thing to do. We need to do it because our collective survival depends on it.

At the same time, we need common agreement that having been wronged does not grant a country the right to repeat the same crime on an even grander scale. Just as having been raped does not bestow the right to rape, or having been robbed the right to steal, having been denied the opportunity to choke the atmosphere with pollution in the past does not grant anyone the right to choke it today. Especially because today's polluters know full well the catastrophic implications of that pollution in ways that early industrialists did not.

So a middle ground must be found. Fortunately, a group of researchers with the think tank EcoEquity and the Stockholm Environment Institute have attempted to do just that: they have developed a detailed and innovative model of what a rigorously fair approach to emission reductions might look like on a global scale. Called the "Greenhouse Development Rights" framework, it is an attempt to better reflect the new realities of wealth and carbon pollution moving to the developing world, while firmly protecting the right to sustainable development and recognizing the West's greater responsibility for cumulative emissions. Such an approach, they believe, is precisely what's needed to break the climate deadlock, since it addresses "the vast disparities found not only between but also *within* countries." Northern countries could be assured that the wealthy of the Global South will do their part now and in the future, while access to what is left of the atmospheric commons would be properly safeguarded for the poor.⁴⁹

With this in mind, each country's fair share of the global carbon-cutting burden is determined by two key factors: responsibility for historical emissions and capacity to contribute, based on the country's level of development. In an illustrative scenario, the United States's share of global emissions cuts needed by the end of the decade might be something like 30 percent (the largest of any single country). But not all of those reductions would need to be done at home—some could be met by financing and otherwise supporting the transition to low-carbon pathways in the South.